NEW YORK
HERALD TRIBUNE
MAY 5 1965

U-2 Secret —A Secret Medal, Too

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WASHINGTON.

In a secret ceremony, the Central Intelligence Agency last month awarded a secret medal to Francis Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot whose crash on May 1, 1960, deep inside the Soviet Union, shook the world—and caused a good deal of anguish to the CIA.

The summit meeting in Paris collapsed in the wake of the U-2 uproar. The affair chilled East-West relations and ended any meaningful contact between President Eisenhower and then Soviet Premier Khrushchev.

Mr. Powers, officially a test pilot in Burbank, Calif., for the Lockheed Aircraft Corp., manufacturer of the U-2, received the CIA medal in a ceremony about two weeks ago at the intelligence agency's headquarters in Langley, Va.

Like the ceremony, the medal is secret. Mr. Powers is not supposed to tell anybody about it. He is not supposed to wear it. In fact, it is sort of an invisible medal.

Certainly the CIA isn't talking about it. When the New York Herald Tribune asked a spokesman for the agency to confirm the award, he replied: "No comment at all. He's a former employee. We don't comment on former employees."

However, it was reliably learned that the secret medal was awarded at a ceremony attended by several top officials of the CIA. The award is known by some in the intelligence business as "one of those under-the-lapel medals."

There were at least two mysteries surrounding the medal: First, is why the CIA wanted to bestow an award on its most famous employee —one who brought the agency under the public scrutiny which it always tries to avoid. Second, why the CIA waited five years to bestow the medal on Mr. Powers. Last Saturday was the fifth anniversary of the U-2 flight.

It is known that plans for the ceremony and the secret medal were made prior to the departure of John A. McCone as CIA director. President Johnson swore in Adm. William Raborn as the new CIA director last Wednesday.

The night before, the President awarded a medal to Mr. McCone for his services as CIA head. That private ceremony was not announced until the next day. But that award, the National Security Medal, unlike Mr. Powers' medal, is not a secret.

The soft-spoken, dark-haired Mr. Powers, raised in the Virginia mountain country and now 35, was traded for Soviet master spy Rudolf Ivanovich Abel on Feb. 10, 1962. The exchange, arranged by New York attorney James B. Donovan, took place on a mist-shrouded bridge in Berlin.

By an odd coincidence, the Soviet Union yesterday made the rare, and first, admission that Col. Abel had served as a master spy for Russia—and was decorated after his exchange for Mr. Powers. A Moscow television program said Abel had served in Soviet intelligence since 1927. It is unusual for the Russians to admit that they have spies, but in recent weeks, this policy seems to have shifted. Soviet agents are being hailed as heroes for home consumption.

Francis Gary Powers as he appeared as a Russian prisoner in Moscow in December of 1960.

The telecast told how Abel was defended against a "possible death sentence" by Mr. [illegible]

never disclosed that the Soviet spy had done his spying in the U. S. A Federal court in New York sentenced him to 30 years in 1957.

The Moscow TV narrator said Abel was now living in Moscow and probably was watching the TV program. He said his arrest was triggered by a "despicable treason." The Russian spy, a highly-educated man and an amateur painter, was arrested in Manhattan after his aid, Reino Hayhahen, defected to the CIA in Paris.

Mr. Powers was downed (the CIA concluded he was hit by a Soviet SA-2 missile) near Sverdlovsk, deep inside the Soviet Union while on a photo reconnaissance mission as a $30,000-a-year pilot for the CIA. Ostensibly, he was a civilian working for Lockheed. This was his "cover."

When Premier Khrushchev revealed the U-2 had been downed, the Eisenhower administration was thrown into confusion. At first, it was said that the spy plane was a NASA "weather" plane, that the pilot had drifted off course after his oxygen gave out. Then Premier Khrushchev revealed that he had both plane and pilot. The U. S. said the spy flight had taken place, but denied it was authorized in Washington. Two days later, the Administration said the flight had been authorized by President Eisenhower, and implied that the flights would continue.

TALKS END

At the Paris summit, the President said the flights over Russia had been stopped and would not be resumed, but the Soviet leader stormed out and the meeting collapsed.

After Mr. Powers' return to this country in 1962, the CIA hid him for 24 days, subjecting him to exhausting interrogation about what had happened up there. Principally, the board of inquiry set up by the CIA wanted to know why he had not used the "destruct" switches in the high-flying U-2 that would have set off a powerful explosive charge—after a time lag, the pilots were told.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, after he passed the boar dof inquiry, Mr. Powers said he had tried to reach the "destruct" switches, but couldn't because of gravity forces.

The pilot was officially cleared by the board of inquiry and a CIA report issued the day he testified before the Senate found that he had lived up to "his obligations as an American under the circumstances in which he found himself." It also said he would get his back pay.

Mr. Powers disappeared off the front pages, back into the CIA. On Nov. 3, 1962, the CIA announced tersely that Mr. Powers had taken "a routine test pilot job" with Lockheed at Burbank, and had left the Agency because "his work was finished." Mr. Powers and his wife, Barbara, were divorced and in October, 1963, he remarried.

As far as is known, he has remained at Lockheed, the company that provided the "cover" for the CIA flights over Russia until the most famous one, on May 1, 1960. And this May, 1965, the pleasant young man from the Virginia hill country has a medal that he cannot wear, awarded at a ceremony, which as far as the CIA is concerned, never took place.

[redacted]